

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 203 (2015) 50 – 56

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY CHALLENGES - TEACHERS
FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY - 3RD EDITION, EPC-TKS 2015

The Evolution of the English Subject Curriculum in Romanian Primary and Lower Secondary Education

Norica-Felicia Bucur^{a*}, Oana-Rica Popa^b

^a 'Nicolae Titulescu' University, Calea Văcărești, Nr. 185, Sector 4, Bucharest, 040051, Romania

^b 'Grigore Moisil' Secondary School, Str. Laurilor, Nr. 25A, Ploiești, 100104, Romania

Abstract

The paper aims at marking the main points of the evolution of the English (as a foreign language) curriculum for primary and lower secondary education in Romanian post-communist era, considering the stages of the education reforms started in 1990 and continuing at present. Since most students in Romanian compulsory education study English as a first foreign language, this diachronic perspective on the English curriculum is an invitation addressed to curriculum designers, teachers and other stakeholders to reflect on the future of this discipline in the given context.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of EPC-TKS 2015.

Keywords: curriculum; Romanian curriculum reform; English as a First Foreign Language (EFL); English subject curriculum, English syllabus

1. Introduction

Besides other more obvious benefits, the ability to communicate in a foreign language gives students the opportunity to become aware of other peoples' cultural values. To a certain extent, by coming into contact with a foreign language, they socially integrate easier, which proves to be an advantage for both the individual and the society.

At present, English is undoubtedly the dominant lingua franca. Most Romanian students choose to study it as their first foreign language, confirming not only the general European trend (EC, 2012), but also global statistics.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40 754 064 215.

E-mail address: norica.bucur@gmail.com

Therefore, the quality of the curricular documents that regulate the teaching of English as a First Foreign Language (EFFL) in Romanian educational system has a high stake, as these documents, together with the teachers that enforce them, decisively influence the teaching-learning activities, producing negative, sometimes irreversible, effects on students' long-term learning.

This paper aims to briefly characterize the Romanian curriculum reform as the necessary background for the analysis of the evolution of the EFFL curriculum in the last 25 years. The analysis is performed taking into consideration the main curriculum documents for EFFL and it strictly encompasses primary and lower secondary education, as these two stages have mostly covered compulsory education in Romania since 1990 (the start of the post-communist reform) and up to now. The conclusions of this analysis might prove helpful for EFFL curriculum designers, teachers and other possible stakeholders.

2. Brief Outline of Romanian Curricular Reform

Considering the progressive extension of the concept of *curriculum*, which, at present, encompasses most educational realities, it is more and more difficult for both specialists and policy makers to draw the coordinates of a school curriculum that would provide a clear vision and direction on what education should be. For instance, according to Schubert (2008, 47), education refers to 'what is worth doing and being, experiencing and knowing, needing, sharing, overcoming, imagining, and contributing'. From this perspective, Romanian curricular reform could be described as an unceasing search for the 'perfect education system', mainly due to its length. Unfortunately, this is not the only reason. According to research (Vlăsceanu, 2002; Potolea, Toma & Borzea, 2012), Romanian curriculum reform has unfolded inconsistently due to lack of political congruence; insufficient dissemination of the curricular changes; not enforcing decisions taken at central level; lack of correlation of the reforming elements.

At present, Romanian curricular reform is still in progress, as 'curricular reforms tend to be continuous', covering 'various stages, such as peaks and radical changes, or intermediary intervals, which are less visible, or consolidation periods' (Potolea et al., 2012, 11). Moreover, at this moment, Romanian curricular reform has reached its climax, as the school curriculum has become 'a common good' (Potolea et al., 2012, 11). Even if Romanian curricular reform has not always been as smooth as silk, positive results have occurred from time to time, and they offered the much needed push forward for this reform to continue and generate better outcomes. The evolution of the EFFL curriculum in Romanian primary and lower secondary school is one possible X-ray of the 25-year Romanian curricular reform.

3. Foreign Language Curriculum vs. Foreign Language Syllabus

Since the 1980s, the theoretical discourse dedicated to curriculum has decisively influenced foreign language teaching, the extensive meaning of the concept of curriculum gradually pervading the theory of foreign language teaching. Thus, specialists interested in the development of foreign language teaching from this perspective have approached the curriculum-syllabus dichotomy in their theoretical works, pointing to (1) the synonymy of the two concepts (Brown, 1994); (2) the curriculum – syllabus hierarchy (Harmer, 2001; Nation & Macalister, 2010); (3) both (1) and (2) (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Yalden, 1987; White, 1988; Rodgers, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Thornbury, 2006 etc.) or (4) the various possibilities of analysing the curriculum (structure, process or product), in a more or less explicit manner (Stern, 1983; Johnson, 1989; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In Romania, pedagogic literature (Potolea & Manolescu, 2006; Negret-Dobridor, 2008; Ionescu, 2011) distinguishes between curriculum and syllabus. The subject curriculum is more than a syllabus, as it is a curricular product, which reflects the guidelines of the National Curriculum (1998) and enables the practitioners to transform formal curricular objectives into achievements. In the specific case of the Romanian EFFL subject curriculum, its main purpose is to develop students' communication competence in English, and, like any other subject curriculum, this official document is vitally important for the efficiency of the EFFL teaching-learning process, as it is the tool used by policy makers to inform teachers, manual authors, examination commissions and students about: (1) the special features of the discipline, its rank in the general curriculum and in the respective school curriculum (core curriculum / compulsory discipline vs. extended core curriculum / elective discipline); (2) the general competences

of the discipline; (3) the values and attitudes to be acquired by studying the discipline; (4) the specific competences of the discipline; (5) the contents of the discipline (divided into topics, communicative functions / speech acts, grammar) for each grade; (6) curricular standards of achievement to be attained at the end of primary school / lower secondary school.

Following the competence-oriented principles of education, which, at least formally (according to the guidelines of the central education authorities) characterize the Romanian system of education, the current Romanian EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education emphasize the importance of: (1) developing communication and interaction competences, based on understanding and correctly applying language structures and functions; (2) developing higher order thinking skills; (3) acquiring values and attitudes specific to EFFL. Under these circumstances, the English teachers are given the possibility to choose didactic strategies and to devise class planning so as to increase the quality of the education process, departing from their students' needs and abilities, guided all along by the information included in the EFFL subject curricula. Nevertheless, this amount of flexibility is quite recent, and, to get from syllabi to subject curricula, EFFL in Romanian primary and lower secondary education has had a long way to go, which is still underway.

4. Methodology

The research is mainly focused on the official curricular documents for EFFL in Romanian primary and lower secondary education, covering the period 1990-present. Our paper attempts to diachronically analyse this period in order to point to the evolution of these documents, as such, and to the differences and similarities between the curricular documents dedicated to the two education cycles (primary and lower secondary) selected. Our analysis grid especially outlines the new elements introduced at various reform stages, characteristic to the general or EFFL curriculum, in order to best identify the strengths and weaknesses of the evolution of the EFFL curriculum for Romanian primary and lower secondary education. Thus, although we endeavour to depict a truthful portrait of the past and present EFFL curriculum so that the future of this subject curriculum could be more easily projected, we acknowledge the limits of our research, as neither secondary curricular documents were included, nor qualitative instruments were employed.

5. The Evolution of the EFFL Subject Curricula for Romanian Primary and Lower Secondary Education

Romanian curricular reform is generally divided into two main stages having 1998, the moment when the *New National Curriculum* was adopted, as a reference point: (1) 1990-1998 = the transition stage; (2) 1998-present = the National Curriculum stage. Nevertheless, for EFFL subject curricula, as well as for the rest of the disciplines, several subdivisions are required to mark the changes that have occurred along the period chosen for our analysis. Thus, EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education have been significantly or partially revised six times since 1990. The most important aspects are included as follows:

1990-1993. Central education authorities decided to include the foreign language discipline in the curriculum framework for primary education (starting with the 2nd grade). For both primary and lower secondary education, there are common objectives for all foreign languages that could be taught at these levels, which are generally oriented towards foreign language communication. This positive feature is counterbalanced by the lack of qualified/experienced teachers and teaching resources. Gradually, English student books started being published, but big distribution delays existed. Considering the provisions of the EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education, the English teacher is supposed to greatly rely on the single manual (if it is available) and to follow a strict class planning and organization, as no methodological suggestions or assessment directions are included whatsoever.

1993-1995. New English subject curricula are devised – information about teaching English in grades 2-8 is included in the same brochure, so any teacher might have a comprehensive view of the general objectives for learning a foreign language and of the specific objectives for teaching EFFL in primary and lower secondary education. Even if the dependence on the single manuals is not totally overcome, the content of the new EFFL subject curricula is based on a completely new structure, which comprises (1) topics, (2) language acts and (3)

lexical-grammatical structures, and the teacher is free to decide the time needed for each lesson. Moreover, the EFFL subject curricula benefit from methodological instructions – a detailed lesson plan as an example. In 1994, only the 5th grade EFFL subject curriculum is revised – both the general and the specific objectives exclusively refer to EFFL. Learning objectives are closely related to linguistic skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing and pronunciation), and the content structure is enriched – vocabulary areas are added.

1995-1998. Even if published in 1995, the EFFL subject curricula for grades 2-6 are gradually applied, in close connection with the introduction of the alternative manuals (the EFFL subject curricula for grades 7-8 were issued in 1997, but they were not applied as such due to the forthcoming curricular reform). Objectives are redefined: specific objectives become reference objectives in 1995 and general objectives turn into framework objectives in 1997 – these terminological changes anticipate the 1998 curricular reform. As compared to previous official EFFL documents, 1995 and 1997 EFFL subject curricula share a ‘presentation section’, which offers English teachers valuable information on recent English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology. The reference objectives and the content of the new EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education follow the trend set by the 1994 5th grade EFFL subject curriculum. Only EFFL subject curricula for grades 5-6 include information referring to the socio-cultural competence (strictly related to the Anglo-Saxon area) and only EFFL subject curricula for grades 7-8 dedicate a special section to the description of the ‘didactic model of the discipline’ = the evolution of the specific abilities (the 4 skills + socio-cultural competence) along the primary and secondary education. Although the latter aspect endows English teachers with a general comprehensive view on EFFL teaching in Romanian primary and secondary, EFFL subject curricula that came in force after 1998 have omitted this section. In contrast with previous provisions (1990-1995), English teachers are now free to allot the necessary number of classes for each lesson.

1998-2003. The *New National Curriculum* (1998) provided the necessary reference framework for the curricular reform, as new concepts were introduced (curricular area, curricular key-stage, basic curriculum, school-based curriculum). Beginning with 1998, the subject curricula comprised in the curricular area *Language and Communication* (Romanian, foreign languages, Latin etc.) share the same framework objectives, related to the 4 basic skills. Due to the new curriculum division, this curricular area achieves greater coherence, allowing for interdisciplinary teaching, at least in theory. According to new curricular provisions, the foreign language discipline becomes optional in grades 1-2 (the subject curriculum is designed by each teacher and approved by the inspector in charge), hence teaching 1st and 2nd grade pupils a foreign language may involve different objectives and content, which may result in lack of homogeneity at national level, or, even worse, in case another optional is preferred, primary school pupils might start studying a foreign language only in their 3rd grade, when this discipline becomes compulsory, which is definitely a step back, considering the situation between 1990-1998. Although, in the 1990-1998 EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education, no specific objectives were associated to the general objective *learning to learn*, in the documents issued in 1998-1999 this objective is omitted altogether. As for the developing of the socio-cultural competence (previously listed only under the general objectives), the EFFL subject curricula designers now create reference objectives and learning activities, although, almost inexplicably, this competence is still confined to the Anglo-Saxon area. References to assessment are included in 1998-1999 EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education for the first time ever: qualitative assessment for primary education and marks for lower secondary education + curricular standards of achievement established per levels of education. Moreover, in 2001, *A Methodological Guide for Applying the EFL Curriculum for Primary and Lower Secondary Education* is issued to help English teachers to correctly apply the curricular provisions and to offer them further methodological guidance.

2003-2011. EFFL subject curricula for grades 7-8 are revised due to (1) changes referring to the length of compulsory education in Romania (from 9 to 10 grades); (2) the recommendations made by the Council of Europe in *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR), document issued in 2001. Accordingly, EFFL subject curricula for grades 7-8 undergo some changes: there are more reference objectives for each framework objective; the reference objectives come closer than before to the task-based curriculum principles. Nevertheless, EFFL subject curricula for grades 7-8 are only partially correlated to CEFR recommendations (in terms of expressing objectives), no common reference level being indicated for the end of the 8th grade. After introducing a new curriculum framework for primary education in 2004, EFFL subject curricula for grades 3-4 were revised, too, so that (1) reference objectives/learning activities would correlate with the

CEFRL levels; (2) pupils' socio-cultural competence could be fully developed according to the international status of English (the term *Anglo-Saxon* is replaced by *Anglophone*). In 2009 all subject curricula for lower secondary education are redesigned with a view to assimilate the competence-based curriculum model and they come in force at the same time, starting with the 2009-2010 school year (not progressively like in 1998). EFFL subject curricula for grades 5-8 (2009) stand out due to: (1) the big amount of details given in the introductory section (arguments for redesigning the EFFL subject curricula, concept definitions, structure of the document, CEFRL level to be achieved); (2) the adherence to new terminology (key competences, general competences, specific competences); (3) the introduction of new structural components (values and attitudes; correlating European key competences with the general competences; methodological suggestions for applying the EFFL subject curricula and student assessment). At closer inspection, EFFL subject curricula for grades 5-8 (2009) contain mistakes (the general competences refer to primary education, although this is not the case; the structure described in the introductory section is different from the actual structure of the EFFL subject curricula) or omissions (using the term *Anglo-Saxon* instead of *Anglophone*, as most recent EFFL subject curricula for grades 3-4 had done) and, in comparison with the 1998 or 2003 documents, changes are perfunctory (the word *objective* is replaced by *competence*). If we consider the new sections (methodological suggestions for applying the subject curricula and student assessment), then the EFFL subject curricula for grades 5-8 represent a step forward, as none of the EFFL documents issued before had offered any information on these aspects. As for the envisaged CEFRL correlation, the EFFL subject curricula for grades 5-8 give details only as far as the linguistic competence is concerned.

2011 - present. This period focuses only on primary education: introducing the preparatory grade as part of compulsory education in Romania, due to 2011 Education Act, meant designing new competence-based subject curricula for primary education, which have been gradually applied starting with 2012-2013 school year. For a comprehensive perspective on education, subject curricula for primary education were grouped taken into consideration curricular key stages: first the basic acquisitions key stage (preparatory grade, grades 1 and 2) in 2012 and part of the development key stage (grades 3-4) in 2015. Departing from recommendations included in documents elaborated at the level of the European Union (*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*) or Council of Europe (CEFRL and the *European Language Portfolio*), there is only one subject curriculum for all foreign languages that could be taught at this education level – the focus is on foreign language communication, as the linguistic content is seen as possible resource for developing foreign language competence. As compared to previous documents regulating ELT in Romanian primary education, the new foreign language subject curricula clearly mark a new beginning, by including valuable methodological suggestions (covering the 4 basic skills, as well as assessment) and resources (learning activities, topics) for effectively teaching a foreign language to young learners. The suggested approach is really flexible, foreign language teachers being thus encouraged to adapt their teaching activity to young learners, so that specific competences could be achieved.

6. Conclusions and Suggestions

The main function of any subject curriculum is to ensure equity and, accordingly, the EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education in Romania should set the standards for studying English as a foreign language in a formal context. Thus, various categories of Romanian students (e.g. rural vs urban; rich vs poor etc.) could benefit from a valuable reference point, being given an equal chance to succeed in learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, EFFL subject curricula should provide teachers with the necessary support for effective implementation, no matter their pre- or in-service training, teaching experience, English proficiency etc.

The analysis of the official curricular documents regulating EFFL in Romanian primary and lower secondary education in the last 25 years revealed both the strengths and the weaknesses characterising the evolution of this discipline. Nevertheless, to go beyond this document-based perspective and get a comprehensive view on the current implementation of the EFFL curriculum, English teachers need to be consulted, as they deal with curricular provisions on a daily basis, they also know students' needs and the problems that might occur in the teaching-learning process. Thus, we intend to continue this research in the near future, by investigating English teachers' opinion on the current EFFL subject curricula for primary and lower secondary education, so that possible ELT

stakeholders in Romania could benefit from valuable data and be able to make informed decisions to ensure the success of ELT in Romania.

Considering the official EFFL curricular documents in force since 1990, the EFFL curriculum for primary and lower secondary education in Romania could serve as a possible example for the tumultuous history of Romanian education reform. Even if stagnation or involution stages could be identified along the analysed period, the EFFL curriculum for primary and lower secondary education has moved forward. The most recently designed foreign language subject curricula for primary education (2012, 2015) definitely prove this positive evolution, which will probably extend to both lower and upper secondary levels in the near future, to ensure competence-based education, in line with European and international trends. Our paper has acknowledged recent efforts dedicated to designing coherent and unitary subject curricula for foreign languages in Romanian primary education and emphasized the need to continue this reformation process with the subsequent education levels so that better long-term results could be envisaged.

Nevertheless, redesigning lower and upper secondary foreign language curricula is not enough. *The National Curriculum. Framework of Reference* (1998) has become quite obsolete, especially since the Education Act (2011) came into force. Therefore, for a bright future, not only foreign language subject curricula, but all subject curricula should stem from a New National Curriculum, which actually exist in a preliminary project form. A group of Romanian education researchers investigated this area and the result was '*The Coordinates of a New National Curriculum*' (Potolea et al., 2012), a well-documented study, formulating the general competences to be developed in Romanian primary and secondary education. The study emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive and unitary curricular perspective, in which the proposed generic competences are more transversal (as compared with the key competences for life-long learning), common to all school levels and adapted to Romanian requirements, and the subject curricula follow the modular design model, so that competence-based education could be easily and efficiently implemented. Therefore, we dare to suggest that education authorities should take into consideration the approval of a new reference framework for the National Curriculum, either by accepting the form proposed by the team led by Potolea or by adapting this document if deemed necessary. Anyway, not only foreign language subject curricula, but all subject curricula will qualitatively improve when this badly needed regulatory document comes into force.

References

- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Dubin, F.; Olshtain, E. (1986). *Course Design. Developing Programs and Materials for Language Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- European Commission. (2012). *Key Data on Teaching Language at School in Europe*. Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (3rd ed.). Harlow: Longman-Pearson.
- Ionescu, M. (2011). *Instrucție și educație. Paradigme educaționale moderne*. Cluj-Napoca: Eikon.
- Johnson, R. K. (1989). A decision-making framework for the coherent language curriculum. In R. K. Johnson (ed.), *The Second Language Curriculum*, 1-23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: from method to postmethod*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.
- Nation, I. S.; Macalister, J. (2010). *Language Curriculum Design*. New York: Routledge.
- Negreț-Dobridor, I. (2008). *Teoria generală a curriculumului educațional. O abordare diacronică și hermeneutică a întemeierii ca știință teleologică*. Iași: Polirom.
- Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-Based Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Potolea, D. & Manolescu, M. (2006). *Teoria și metodologia curriculumului*. M.E.C., P.I.R.
- Potolea, D., Toma, S. & Borzea, A. (coord.) (2012). *Coordonate ale unui nou cadru de referință al curriculumului național*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Richards, J. C.; Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodgers, T. S. (1989). Syllabus design, curriculum development and polity determination. In R.K. Johnson (ed.), *The Second Language Curriculum*, 24-34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schubert, W. H. (2008). The curriculum-curriculum: Experiences in teaching curriculum. In B. S. Stern & M. L. Kysilka, (eds.), *Contemporary Readings in Curriculum* (pp. 41-47). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thornbury, S. (2006). *An A-Z of ELT. A dictionary of terms and concepts used in English Language Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan.

- Vlăsceanu, L. (coord.) (2002). *Școala la răscruce - schimbare și continuitate în curriculumul învățământului obligatoriu*. Iași: Polirom.
- White, R. V. (1988). *The ELT Curriculum: Design Innovation and Management*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Yalden, J. (1987). *Principles of Course Design for Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- *** Weekly Magazine. *Tribuna învățământului*, nr.1, 13.01.1990 – nr. 507, 11.10.1999.
- *** EFFL subject curricula for Romanian primary and lower secondary education – 1990-2015. <http://programe.ise.ro/Actuale/Vechi.aspx>.